

One Giant Step for O'Neil Farm Project

By MARK PRIMACK

In the last days of December, after two years of tremendous effort, the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts conveyed the

COMMENTARY

O'Neil Farm in Duxbury and the

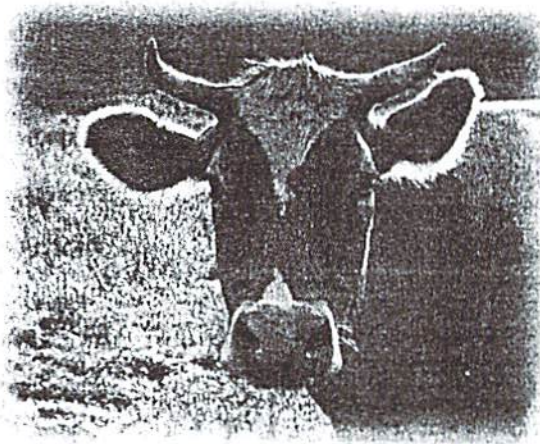
balance of a \$1 million endowment to Historic O'Neil Farm, Inc., permanently protecting one of the oldest and last working farms on the South Shore. "Saving this farm was a truly awesome challenge for this small land trust, but we are an organization that thinks about posterity—from that perspective we felt that this was a critical project," said Wildlands Trust executive director Mark Primack. "We stretched ourselves and our friends in every way and ultimately had to draw from our own modest financial resources to meet this great project's financial goals. Now we set the farm on its way to a hopeful future. We are so grateful to the many wonderful people who helped us get to this day."

With participation from generous donors, civic minded residents of Duxbury, volunteers and farmer Carl O'Neil, the Wildlands Trust raised over four million dollars in public and private funds for the purchase of the land and endowment; it placed permanent agricultural and conservation restrictions on the 150-acre farm; and, with O'Neil, developed the new farm corporation. The O'Neil farm will provide educational opportunities to future generations about this region's long and now still living agricultural heritage. High-quality mostly upland wildlife habitat has been conserved in perpetuity. A network of trails will be created for public recreation on the diverse landscapes of the property.

According to Wildlands Trust President Howard Randall, who grew up in Halifax and worked on local dairy farms in the summer, "I was deeply touched when Carl O'Neil shared his early childhood commitment to preserve the farm when it seemed the family might not be able to continue." Randall said, "You must first have a dream if you want to make a dream come true. We must first thank Carl O'Neil for his vision and the commitment to see it through. We must again say thanks to the

many individuals who shared our vision and contributed so much of their time, talent, and resources to protect this very important property. Town and state officials stood with us at critical times. The creativity and heart-felt concern for posterity of our staff and volunteers in "selling" plywood cows and collector milk bottles was outstanding. The foresight of our donors, their love of land, our heritage and this community, has been quite extraordinary. Thank you one and all!"

Two years ago the Wildlands Trust committed to raise \$4.35 million dollars to both purchase the Duxbury farm and provide an endowment to ensure that the farm would remain in operation, maintain its



buildings, and host educational programs. The alternative at the time was to see all or a portion of the farm be sold for development. As one of his numerous contributions to the project, farmer O'Neil took a very substantial reduction in the amount he received for his share of the property. To allow the farm to be transferred to Historic O'Neil Farm, Inc., the Wildlands Trust borrowed \$250,000 out of its own quite limited endowment to fulfill its responsibilities to this project and also assumed over \$150,000 in indirect, non-staff costs for things such professional legal fees in a very complicated project (the Trust's own attorneys contributed many hours of pro bono time), a comprehensive appraisal, and survey.

Wildlands Trust Treasurer Doug Hart declared "This organization has put its own limited resources alongside those of its donors to advance this important conservation project. We sincerely hope that our regular members and donors and our friends in the Duxbury community will help to replenish our coffers to enable the Trust to take on other great projects."

The primary focus of the farm, beyond continuing in agriculture, will be to invite school children and families to experience the connection between the productive earth and the food we eat to sustain ourselves. The farm is considered a premier example of the agricultural heritage that for three centuries dominated both the South Shore's economy and way of life. The 145-acre farm has been operating continuously since 1729 and in the same family since 1836, resulting in the state designating it as a "Century Farm" several years ago. It is believed to be the last commercial scale working farm remaining between Boston and the tip of Cape Cod in any coastal town. AW Perry real estate company donated a five acre in holding parcel to bring the total acreage to 150.

The turkeys, bluebirds and hawks which have nested on the farm for hundreds if not thousands of years now have a secure home. Working agriculture as well will always have a home on the farm, reminding us of our past even as it continues into the future. The new Historic O'Neil Farm, Inc. has been created and endowed solely to insure that the farm remains a living legacy for our children and grandchildren, and that future generations will find joy and wonder meeting animals, touching the earth, and wandering on trails around the diverse property. The trustees of the Historic O'Neil Farm have already begun planning for these purposes. Thanks to so many of you, the future of the farm is bright.

To find out how to become a member of the Wildlands Trust or to make a donation to help us save other special places please call 781-934-9018 or visit our web page at www.wildlandstrust.org.

Mark Primack is executive director of the Wildlands Trust.